

LORE Methodological note 2016:3

The effect of delayed first survey invitation to a newly recruited panel.

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ABSTRACT

This methodological note examines the questions of how quickly after you have recruited new respondents to an online panel you should wait before sending them their first survey. The note reports an experiment where 4,000 newly recruited panel members were randomly assigned to either receive their first survey quickly (after just a few days) after they signed up to the panel or assigned not to receive any survey from the panel until after approximately two and a half months. The results reveal that when the group who did not receive a survey quickly after recruitment finally got their first survey, their participation rate was significantly lower (eight percentage points) than the group who had received an earlier survey quickly after being recruited. This effect also seems to be lasting over time.

Introduction

When new people are recruited to an online panel, is it important to send them a first survey invitation quickly, or will they be just as committed to future survey participation if the first invitation is delayed? This is the straightforward question this short report seeks to answer. When it comes to people actively participating in an online panel, the optimal time between survey invitations is not obvious. Too short between invitations might make panelists suffer from survey fatigue, while too far between invitations might make them feel less engaged with the panel. However, we have no clear reason to expect any beneficial effects from delaying the first survey invitation to newly recruited panelists who have just signed up for participation. Thus, the question is rather how detrimental delaying the first invitation is to future participation, and more specifically in this study whether a delay of a few months has a negative effect? Further, this report will also examine whether such effects are temporary or linger on in the long run. These questions are relevant because if it turns out to be substantially detrimental to future participation not to receive a first invitation quickly, recruitments must be planned accordingly.

Data

This study makes use of approximately new panel members that were recruited from the Vote Compass for the 2014 Swedish general election at the Aftonbladet website. 4,000 study participants were randomly chosen from those who signed up for to the Citizen

Panel at the University of Gothenburg via the Vote Compass during the last three weeks preceding the parliamentary election.

One third of the participants were randomly assigned to be put in quarantine for two and a half months and not receive any survey invitation until November, while the other two thirds were assigned to quickly receive a post-election survey. The participants in this study were recruited between August 26 and September 14 (the day of the election). Those who were assigned to quickly receive their first survey got an e-mail invitation on Wednesday the 17th of September 2014, three days after the election. This means that the time until the first survey invitation varied from a maximum of three weeks to a minimum of three days. For the group who was put in quarantine, the period until the first invitation thus varied between approximately two and a half and three months. In order to check the long run effects, the participation rates in a survey another six months later are also examined. The survey in September 2014 was a special post-election survey, November 2014 was Citizen Panel wave 13, and the survey in May 2015 was Citizen Panel wave 15 run by the Laboratory of Opinion Research (LORE) at the University of Gothenburg.

Results

The participation rate among the 2,580 invited to the quick survey launched three days after the election was 71 percent. When a few months had passed, all study participants were invited to a new survey in November. The participation rate was substantially higher among those who had already received an invitation quickly after they signed up for the panel. This difference amounts to approximately 8 percentage points and is statistically significant.

Table 1. Participation rates in subsequent surveys depending on time until the first survey (percent)

	September 2014	November 2014	May 2015
Quick survey	71 (2580)	69 (2579)	60 (2351)
Delayed survey	- (1484)	61 (1484)	54 (1342)

Comment. The percentages are participation rates computed as the share of those invited that started the survey. Numbers in parentheses are the number of panelists invited to take the survey. The differences in participation rates between the two groups in November and in May 2015 are statistically significantly different at the 99% confidence level ($p \leq .001$).

Table 1 makes it clear that when we follow up the survey participation half a year later, in May 2015, the difference in participation rates is still both substantial and statistically significant. Those who were invited to a survey quickly after their recruitment now achieved a participation rate of 60 percent, compared to 54 percent among those who had to wait a couple of months for their first survey invitation from the Citizen Panel.

This study cannot tell us how quickly to send the first survey, or exactly when a delay starts to reduce future participation rates or how much a specific delay matters. However,

these results firmly demonstrate that such effects can be substantial and should not be taken lightly. In the long run a difference of eight or six percentage points can make a big difference in the payoff that a recruitment investment makes.

Although limited, this report makes it clear that more follow-up studies on this question would be valuable. Such studies could shed light on both the generalizability of these findings and more precise information of the relationship between time to first survey and future participation.

The Laboratory of Opinion Research (LORE) is an academic web survey center located at the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg. LORE was established in 2010 as part of an initiative to strengthen multidisciplinary research on opinion and democracy. The objective of the Laboratory of Opinion Research is to facilitate for social scientists to conduct web survey experiments, collect panel data, and to contribute to methodological development. For more information, please contact us at:

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